

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan, and then cast out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Our Gospel lesson picks things up right after that. John was then handed over to prison, and Jesus began His ministry.

Jesus' ministry was primarily a preaching ministry. And this is what Jesus preached: "*the good news of God.*" What is that? "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the gospel.*" What John had proclaimed as imminent, namely, the coming of the Lord, Jesus proclaimed as being fulfilled in Him in the flesh. What John witnessed after he had baptized Jesus, namely Jesus' anointing by the Holy Spirit and the testimony of the Father, Jesus affirmed. He is the Christ; He is the Son of God; and in His person He brings to fulfillment the "*kingdom of God.*" Our God is King Jesus; in Him the reign of God has come.

Therefore, "*repent,*" Jesus preached, "*and believe in the gospel.*" This preaching is the lifeblood of the kingdom — of the church. A church that rightly preaches the Gospel does not preach Christian perfection. To be sure, Jesus teaches that our "*righteousness [must exceed] that of the scribes and Pharisees*" (Matt. 5:20). It's not just don't murder, but don't get angry and don't insult others. It's not just don't commit adultery, but don't look at another lustfully. It's not just "*love your neighbor,*" but "*[l]ove your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*" (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 43-44).

Jesus doesn't relax a single law, and He doesn't set Moses aside. But Jesus also knows that the Law sets before us an impossible standard — impossible for us as mere mortals. He doesn't suggest that we can keep it; instead, He says, "I will accomplish it for you." "I will fulfill the Law for you" (Matt. 5:17-18).

When Jesus says, "*You ... must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matt. 5:48), He doesn't say it with any false hopes that we can achieve it. Rather, having done for us everything that we cannot do, He says, "*repent and believe in the gospel.*" This is the lifeblood of the church.

Luther taught it. He led off his 95 Theses with this acknowledgment, namely that "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance" (*Luther's Works*, 31:25). This life of Christian repentance begins at baptism and is meant to continue until the Christian falls asleep in Christ.

You know Luther also taught it in the catechism; it's what our baptisms indicate. "What does such baptizing with water indicate? It indicates that the Old Adam in us [that is, that old sinful nature that assails us and causes us to sin]

should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires” (Luther, Small Catechism, Baptism, Part 4).

This is what Jesus is talking about when He says, therefore, “*repent*” — repentance is Godly sorrow for sin (contrition, we call it) and an acknowledgement of it. This is repentance in the narrow sense. Sometimes we talk about repentance more broadly, which includes both contrition and faith. But here, repent means contrition and confession because Jesus follows it up with “*believe in the gospel.*” Thus, Philip Melanchthon wrote of this verse in the Apology, “In the first clause He convicts of sins” (Ap XIIa:45).

That doesn’t mean that repentance is easy — just because Jesus says do it. It isn’t. It’s hard to do, whether individually or corporately. It’s hard to admit error; it’s hard to admit failure; it’s hard to admit we’ve hurt someone ... by our action or inaction. It takes humility. And yet, that’s what Jesus calls us to do.

Corporately, that’s exactly what we do here at church. Every Divine Service, we say hard words, calling ourselves “poor miserable sinner[s],” confessing to the Lord “all [our] sins and iniquities with which [we] have ever offended [Him] and justly deserved [His] temporal and eternal punishment.” And we say we’re “heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them” (*Lutheran Service Book*, Divine Service Setting 3).

For many heterodox churches, such language is so uncomfortable that they simply don’t say it. All calls for repentance as Jesus preached are removed from the service. Talk of sin and iniquities, contrition and repentance is replaced by soft talk more palatable to the ears. But St. Paul charged Timothy to “*preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort ...*” (2 Tim. 4:2); that is, call out sin, tell a person of God’s disapproval and call him to account, and urge Christians to repentance and to do better. Paul also knew that a “*time [was] coming when people [would] not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they [would] accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions*” (v. 3).

There were surely such times in the past, but we’re living in such a time also now. Churches are filled with people who like their ears scratched, who listen to false teachers telling them what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear. These people have stopped following the truth and wandered off into myths, as St. Paul says (2 Tim. 4:4). The Truth, Jesus, calls us to repentance, and He calls us to believe in the Gospel that He came for us, that He fulfilled the Law for us, that He died for us, for our sins, that He rose from the dead, that He forgives our sins by words, and water, and supper, that He sent the Spirit to call us to this faith and to this life, that He sent out apostles and evangelists, pastors and teachers to call us to repentance and to believe in the Gospel.

Thus, even as Jesus began His ministry, preaching “*repent and believe in the gospel,*” so also, He called Peter and Andrew, James and John into discipleship and to this same message, saying: “*Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.*” It’s what He instructed them as He prepared to ascend back to the Father. He said, “preach of me, how I fulfilled what Moses and the prophets foretold and what the Psalms sing forth; preach my suffering and death; preach my resurrection from the dead; preach “*repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (Luke 24:44-47). And the Book of Acts bears witness: that’s exactly what Peter and John, and later Paul preached.

Listen to Peter: “*what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus ...*” (Acts 3:18-20). Listen to Paul: “*You yourselves know ... how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Acts 20:18, 20-21).

They didn’t try to lure people into the church falsely with soft, deceptive words, soft-pedaling repentance. They didn’t try to hook people with the wriggling worm of your best life now, of temporal successes, of naming and claiming. That’s not the kind of fishing Jesus called the disciples to. Our fieldworker Paul is a fisherman, and that’s how he fishes — for fish, please understand. He uses lures and bait; the disciples didn’t. They used nets, and so as fishers of men, they would drag people into the church in the nets built with the tough, crisscrossed cords of repentance and faith in the gospel ... the gospel fulfilled in Christ, in His cross, in His resurrection, the gospel of “the forgiveness of sins ... granted [us] for Christ’s sake” (Ap XIIa, 45). Moreover, what Christ has earned and granted us, “faith obtains,” “faith grasps” (Ap XIIa, 36).

This may not seem like much of an epiphany to you in this season of “God in man made manifest,” but that’s because you have been taught it, for today this is a radical teaching — that salvation is in Christ alone, that we must repent and believe. These seemingly simple words of Jesus are “the most basic statement concerning the Christian faith” (Voelz, *Concordia Commentary, Mark 1:1–8:26*, p. 153). Much of the world is blind to it or rejects it. But you know it, and you believe it: in Jesus the time has been fulfilled; the reign of God has come. Therefore, as His baptized, let your life be a life of repentance, and by word and Sacrament may you be filled with faith in Christ Jesus for your salvation, for your life. Come humbly and faithfully to Christ’s supper and be strengthened in your faith and in its fruit: love for one another.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.